



## **Powerful Aspects of Women's Empowerment - “Socio-Economic Status and Occupation”: With Special Reference to Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts of West Bengal**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Microfinance initiatives have emerged as a powerful instrument in addressing the economic and social marginalization of women in Purba Bardhaman and Paschim Bardhaman. By providing access to credit, encouraging entrepreneurship, and fostering collective strength through Self-Help Groups, microfinance has helped many women move towards financial independence and social recognition. Considering that women constitute over 70% of the world's poor, empowering them through financial inclusion is not only an economic necessity but also a matter of human rights and dignity. Although challenges remain in the form of poverty, gender bias, and structural inequalities, microfinance institutions hold a transformative opportunity to reduce such barriers and actively promote women's empowerment. By extending beyond mere financial assistance to include training, awareness, and market linkages, these initiatives can create a lasting impact. Thus, microfinance in Purba Bardhaman and Paschim Bardhaman has demonstrated that empowering women is not only essential for their personal growth but also for fostering inclusive and sustainable community development.

**Keywords:** *Poverty, Empowerment, Entrepreneurship, Transformative, Financial.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Microfinance has been an effective instrument for empowering women with modest incomes. Strategies directed at women have good reasons. Women have lower salaries and more economic disadvantages than men. Several studies have found that women who have taken part in microfinance programs report feeling more valued by their communities. They also show women participating more actively in community activities, including attending meetings, organizing social change, and giving advice to others.

Microfinance initiatives have benefited a lot of women. Microfinance institutions have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to actively seek to empower low-income women and lessen the adverse consequences that some may experience. Poverty is a hindrance to everyone's right to a dignified existence. Women make up over 70% of the 1.3 billion impoverished individuals on the planet.

Despite being half of the human resource, women are often ignored and treated with disdain due to their lower socioeconomic standing. Since women are the poorest of the poor, empowering them is a fundamental human right.

The majority of people attribute the creation of the Grameen Bank model, the foundation of contemporary microcredit, to economist Muhammad Yunus. In 1976, a group of women in Bangladesh started this program by borrowing \$27 to finance their own small businesses. The women were able to go on managing the business after they paid back the loan.

Achieving gender parity in power requires immediate action to strengthen women's agency. It is only right that women and men enjoy equal rights in all areas of society, including the political sphere, the economic sphere, and the legal system. Increasing women's agency, giving them more say in critical decisions, providing more options, more chances, and more resources is one method to empower them. When more women work, more goods are produced, and poverty levels fall. The economy expands more rapidly when women are able to own homes and start families.

It is well acknowledged that financial resources play a crucial role in supporting entrepreneurship and alleviating poverty in emerging countries. Three types of significant resources are identified by the resource-based perspective theory: organizational, human, and physical resources. Information (knowledge), people, organizational procedures, and finances are all covered by these resources. In order for any organization to survive, grow, and evolve, this reflects a synergy of resources. However, a lack of funding and limited access to trustworthy funding sources continue to be major barriers for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) to realize their full potential in terms of expansion, innovation, and job creation. They consequently fall short in growing, creating long-lasting competitive advantages, and effectively implementing their objectives.

Developing countries are seeing a proliferation of microcredit services across all industries thanks to the rise in prominence of microfinance institutions (MFIs) during the past three decades. These groups help the poor in both urban and rural regions by providing loans, savings, insurance, and money transfers through various institutional structures such as credit unions, commercial banks, credit cooperatives, and specialist banks. In the past, microfinance institutions have sought to address the financial needs of underprivileged and marginalized groups, including women, by expanding their service offerings and ensuring their long-term viability. MFIs are thought to play a key role in efforts by governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to reduce poverty in developing nations, especially when it comes to addressing social and financial exclusion. In order to address the financial issues of the less fortunate, governments and public institutions implemented policies and strategies. In addition to creating an environment conducive to the launch of microfinance institutions (MFIs), this also comprises drafting microfinance-related legislation and standards. Goals of the initiatives included liberalizing financial institutions and attracting more investment by lowering entry barriers.

Nonetheless, some MFIs continue to charge exorbitant interest rates, have bureaucratic tendencies, strict restrictions, and insufficient competence, governance, transparency, and accountability to function as responsible financial intermediaries. The viability of microfinance organizations and services for the growth of the SME sector is called into question by these issues.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

Empowerment is a multi-faceted process that aims to help people or communities reach their maximum potential in every area of life. They will be liberated from the constraints of tradition, belief, and practice, and given more access to information and tools so that they can better manage their lives. Power to accomplish one's objectives, rather than power over other people, is at the heart of empowerment. In a nutshell, empowerment is the step-by-step process of increasing one's self-awareness and skill set, which in turn increases one's agency, voice, and ability to effect positive change. Combating gender bias and achieving gender equality can be achieved through the empowerment of women. The empowerment of women is a stated objective of most microfinance programs.

The pursuit of women's empowerment can be motivated by a variety of factors. Some think that aiding the poorest and most vulnerable people should be a top priority because women are disproportionately poor and vulnerable. Alternatively, there are many who think that empowering women via investing in their capacities not only leads to more economic growth and development, but also to greater autonomy, which is an admirable aim in and of itself. Women require market access, technical and management expertise, and financial resources to succeed as entrepreneurs. Catalyzing relevant economic activity at the grassroots level and providing new chances for rural women to earn better incomes to enhance their standard of living are essential to empowering them.

One goal of credit for empowerment is to help the poorest people meet their basic consumption needs. Efforts are made to empower many individuals, typically in groups, to enhance their ability to absorb loans and establish sustainable livelihoods. A self-help group (SHG) is an economically disadvantaged group that aims to provide its members the tools they need to become more self-sufficient and active members of society. Gathering the impoverished together to form savings groups, enhancing their skills, and giving them the ability to access external loans are the main goals. Being an entrepreneur empowers women monetarily and grants them decision-making autonomy because women typically take the lead in starting, structuring, and running their own businesses. To be considered a women's enterprise, according to the Indian government, an industrial unit must have at least 51% female ownership and employ at least 51% female workers.

The data concerning the study was collected, structured and analysed by means of the scientific methodology. Descriptive statistics was used for categorizing and analytically summarizing the data. In order to classify and analytically summarize the data in a thorough manner, descriptive analysis is employed. It relies on data categorization and percentages. Using demographic variables such as age, religion, education level, household composition, income, and savings, the descriptive analysis for this study classified the sampled data of Purba and Paschim Bardhaman respondents. The tables presented below reflect the same information.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- 1) To analyze the socio-economic characteristics of the women in Purba and Paschim Bardhaman districts of West Bengal.
- 2) To examine the Occupational Structure of Women in this study area.

## OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE

Purba Bardhaman district in West Bengal exhibits a predominantly agricultural occupational structure, with a significant portion of the population engaged in farming. However, the non-agricultural sector, including industries and services, is also growing. Within agriculture, a diverse range of farming types and labor roles exist, including cultivators, agricultural laborers, and various categories of farmers like small, marginal, and Bargadars,

Paschim Bardhaman is an industrial hub in West Bengal, with a workforce primarily employed in the industrial sector, followed by agriculture and allied sectors, and then services. The district has a strong presence of steel plants, coal mines, and other industrial units.

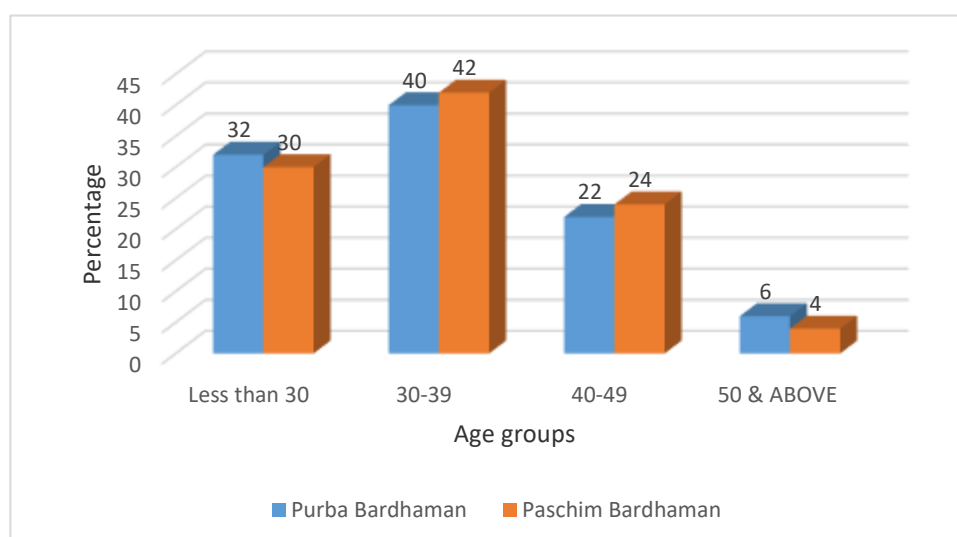
## SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

### • AGE OF RESPONDENTS

The tables below depict the Age-wise classification of both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman respondents.

**Table 1: Frequency Distribution and Percentages of Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts' Respondents with Respect to Age**

Age Group (in Years)	Purba Bardhaman		Paschim Bardhaman	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Less than 30	80	32	75	30
30-39	100	40	105	42
40-49	55	22	60	24
50 & ABOVE	15	6	10	4
Total	250	100	250	100



**Fig 1: Bar Graph Showing Percentages of Age of Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts' Respondents**

### Purba Bardhaman

The above table and bar chart shows that out of the total no. of respondents 40% belonged to 30-39 years of age, 32% belonged to age group of less than 30 years, 22% belonged to age group of 40-49 years and only 6 % belonged to age group of 50 & above. It can be inferred that women belonging to less than 50 years of age are more motivated to empower themselves. And the highest percentage belongs to age group 30-39 years.

### Paschim Bardhaman

The above table and figure show that out of the total no. of respondents, 42 % belong to age group of 30-39 years of age. In age groups less than 30 years the percentage is 30% of respondents. 24% of respondents belongs to the age group 40-49 years and 6% of respondents belongs to the age group 50 & above.

### • RELIGION OF RESPONDENTS

The tables below depict religion-wise classification of both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman respondents.

**Table 2: Frequency Distribution and Percentages of both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts' Respondents with Respect to Religion**

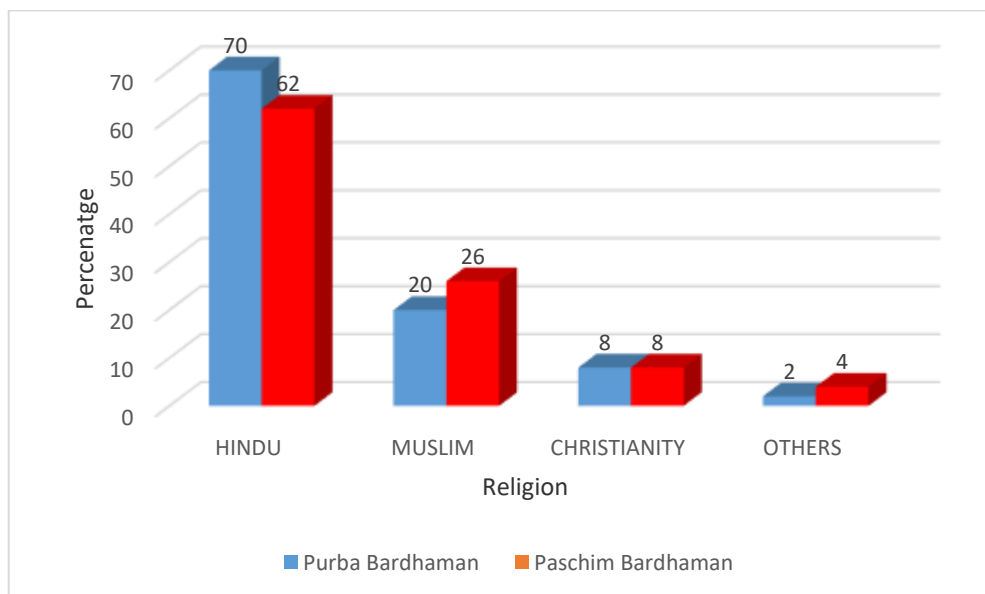
Religion	Purba Bardhaman		Paschim Bardhaman	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Hindu	175	70	155	62
Muslim	50	20	65	26
Christianity	20	8	20	8
Others	5	2	10	4
Total	250	100	250	100

### Purba Bardhaman

The table shows 70% of respondents are Hindu, 20% of respondents are Muslim, 8 % are Christian and 2 % are others. The Hindu respondents are more than any other religion.

### Paschim Bardhaman

The table shows 62 % of respondents are Hindu, 26 % of respondents are Muslim, 8 % are Christian and 2 % are others. The Hindu respondents are more than any other religion.



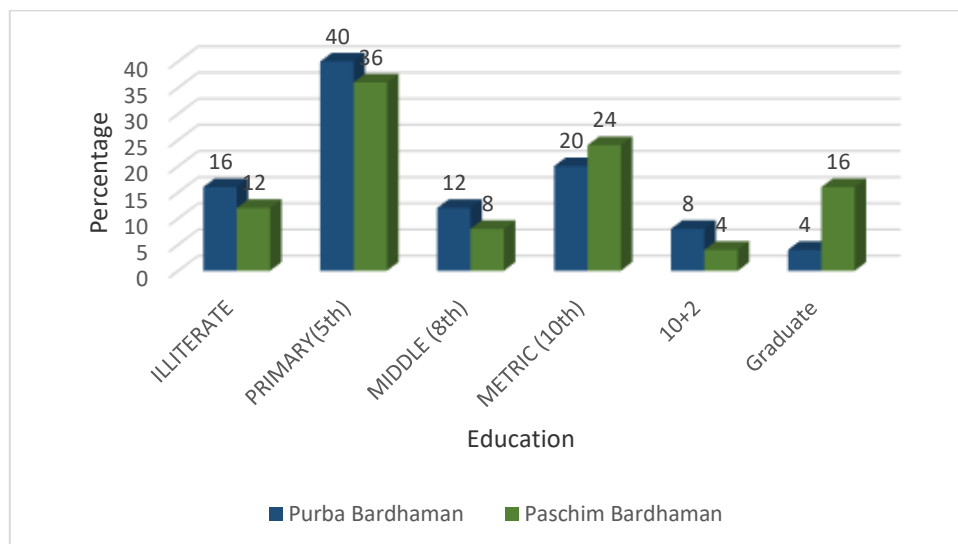
**Fig 2: Bar Chart of Percentage of Both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts' Respondents with Respect to Religion**

### • EDUCATION OF RESPONDENTS

The table below depicts the education-wise classification of both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman respondents

**Table 3: Frequency Distribution and Percentages of Both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts with Respect to Educational Level**

Education	Purba Bardhaman		Paschim Bardhaman	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Illiterate	40	16	30	12
Primary(5 <sup>th</sup> )	100	40	90	36
Middle (8 <sup>th</sup> )	30	12	20	8
Metric (10 <sup>th</sup> )	50	20	60	24
10+2	20	8	10	4
Graduate	10	4	40	16
Total	250	100	250	100



**Fig 3: Bar Chart of Percentage of Both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts' with Respect to Respondents with Respect to Educational Level**

#### Purba Bardhaman

The table shows 16% of respondents are illiterate, 40% of respondents are Primary class (5<sup>th</sup>), 12% are Middle class (8<sup>th</sup>), 20% are Metric (10<sup>th</sup>), 8% are 10+2 pass and 4% are Graduate. The majority are primary (5<sup>th</sup>) pass out respondents.

#### Paschim Bardhaman

The table shows 12% of respondents are illiterate, 36% of respondents are Primary class (5<sup>th</sup>), 8% are Middle class (8<sup>th</sup>), 24% are Metric (10<sup>th</sup>), 4% are 10+2 pass and 16% are Graduate. The majority are primary (5<sup>th</sup>) pass out respondents.

#### • INCOME OF RESPONDENTS

The tables and bar-charts below depict the classification of both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman respondents on the basis of income earned by them.

**Table 4: Frequency Distribution and Percentages of Both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Respondents with Respect to Income Earned**

Income (in Rs. )	Purba Bardhaman		Paschim Bardhaman	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Less Than 4000	45	18	40	16
4000-7999	70	28	120	48
8000-11999	100	40	30	12
12000 & Above	35	14	60	24
Total	250	100	250	100

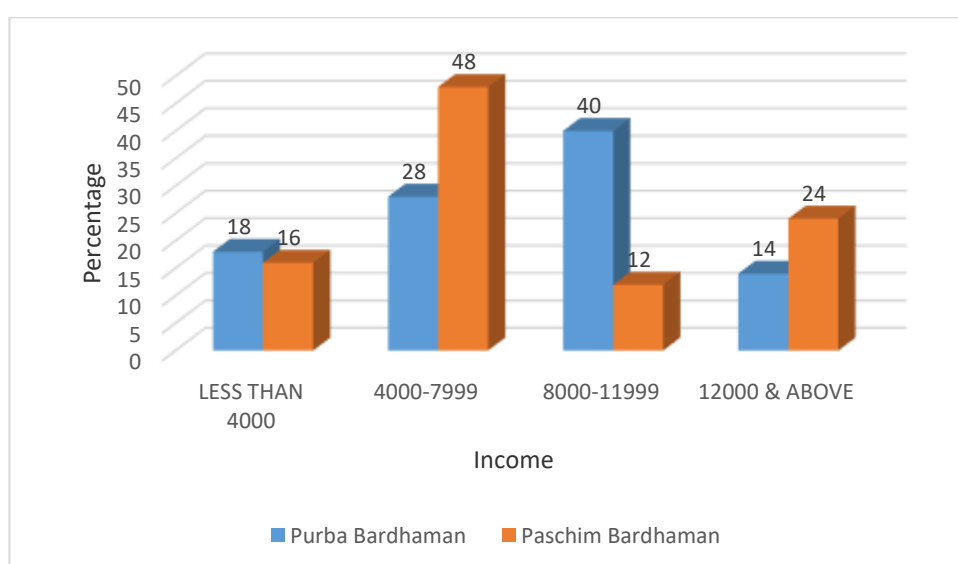


### Purba Bardhaman

The table shows 18 % of respondent has income less than 4000, 48 % has income between 4000-7999, 12 % has income 8000-11999 and 24 % has income 12000& above. The majority has income between 4000-7999.

### Paschim Bardhaman

The table shows 16% of respondent has income less than 4000, 28% has income between 4000-7999, 40% has income 8000-11999 and 14 % has income 12000 & above. The majority has income between 8000-11999.



**Fig 4: Bar Chart of Percentage of Both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts' Respondents with Respect to Income Earned**

### • SAVINGS OF RESPONDENTS

The tables and bar-charts below depict the classification of both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman respondents on the basis of their savings.

**Table 5: Frequency Distribution and Percentages of Both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts' Respondents with Respect to Savings**

Savings	Purba Bardhaman		Paschim Bardhaman	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Below 500	115	46	120	48
500-999	50	20	40	16
1000-1499	60	24	30	12
1500 and above	25	10	60	24
Total	250	100	250	100



### Purba Bardhaman

The table shows 46 % of respondent has savings below 500, 20 % has savings 500-999, 24 % has savings 1000-1499 and 10 % has savings 1500 and above. The majority has savings below 500.

### Paschim Bardhaman

The table shows 48 % of respondent has savings below 500, 16 % has savings 500-999, 12 % has savings 1000-1499 and 24 % has savings 1500 and above. The majority has savings below 500.

### • BENEFITS OF MICROFINANCE

The tables and bar charts below depict the classification of both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman respondents on the basis of benefits of microfinance.

**Table 6: Frequency Distribution and Percentages of Both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts' Respondents Showing Benefits Enjoyed from Microfinance**

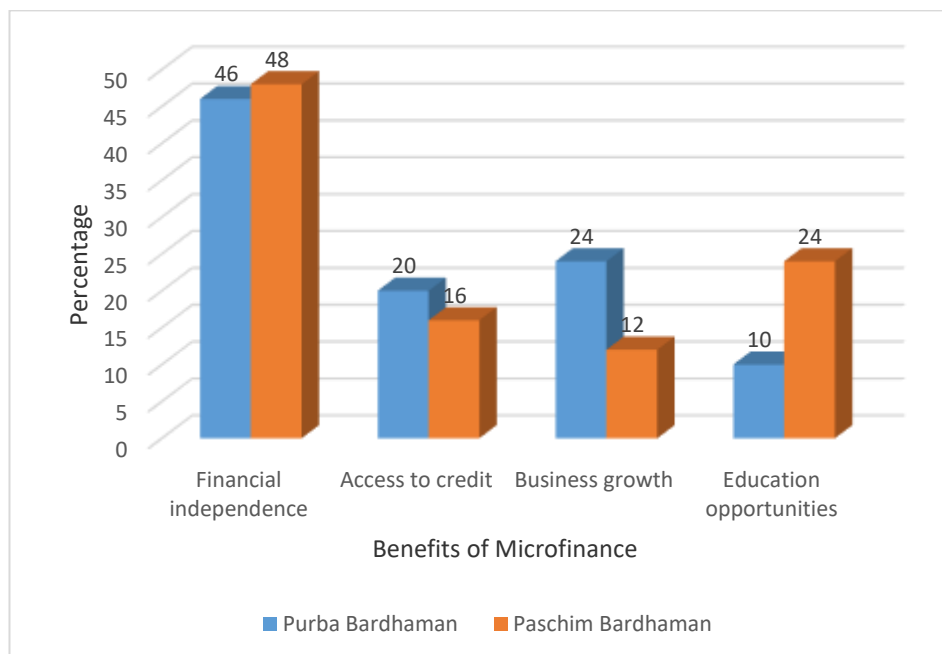
Benefits of Microfinance	Purba Bardhaman		Paschim Bardhaman	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Financial independence	115	46	120	48
Access to credit	50	20	40	16
Business growth	60	24	30	12
Education opportunities	25	10	60	24
Total	250	100	250	100

### Purba Bardhaman

The table shows 46 % of respondent gets financial independence, 20 % gets access to credit, 24% gets business growth, 10 % gets education opportunities due to microfinances. The majority gets financial independence due to microfinance.

### Paschim Bardhaman

The table shows 48 % of respondent gets financial independence, 16 % gets access to credit, 12 % gets business growth, 24 % gets education opportunities due to microfinances. The majority gets financial independence due to microfinance.



**Fig 5: Bar Chart of Percentage of Both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts' Respondents with Respect to Savings**

#### • INVOLVEMENT WITH MICROFINANCE

The tables and bar- charts below depict the classification of both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman respondents on the basis of involvement with microfinance.

**Table 7: Frequency Distribution and Percentages of Both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts' Respondents Showing Involvement with Microfinance**

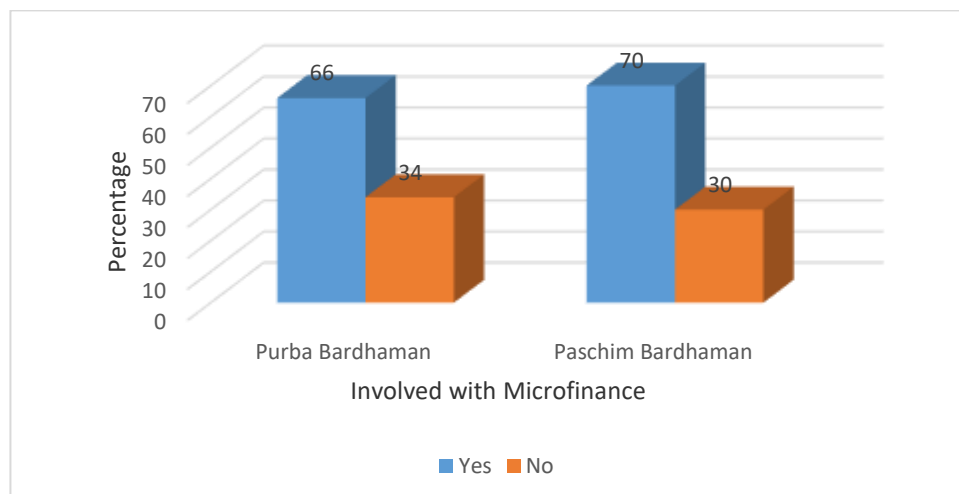
Involvement with Microfinance	Purba Bardhaman		Paschim Bardhaman	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	165	66	175	70
No	85	34	75	30
Total	250	100	250	100

#### **Purba Bardhaman**

The table shows 66 % of respondent answered 'Yes' and 34 % answered 'No'. The majority was involved with microfinance programs.

#### **Paschim Bardhaman**

The table shows 70 % of respondent answered 'Yes' and 30 % answered 'No'. The majority was involved with microfinance programs.



**Fig 6: Bar Chart of Percentage of Both Purba and Paschim Bardhaman Districts' Respondents, Involved with Microfinance**

## CONCLUSION

In the context of women's development, empowerment can be defined as the process by which a woman takes charge of her life and the things happening around her by recognizing, facing, and eventually conquering challenges. This dynamic and multi-faceted method aims to empower women to embrace their true selves and excel in all aspect of life. The rural poor have shown they can form self-help groups and gain economic and financial stability with the help of non-governmental organizations and microfinance institutions. A number of studies have shown that women's empowerment is affected by the availability of credit.

Consistent increases in thrift show that group members' confidence is rising, making it a crucial measure of a group's success. The SHGs mostly engage in the collecting of thrift items. Extremely high-interest loans from professional moneylenders and others are a common way for the impoverished to cover unexpected expenses like food, clothing, and transportation. The rural poor have benefited greatly from SHGs, which have helped them develop the habit of saving and have mobilized their savings for the common good. It is imperative that both the government and NGOs adopt a 'credit with social development' strategy that goes beyond simply providing credit. Better outcomes in alleviating poverty and empowering women can be achieved by carefully crafting policy implications and program features.

Offering small loans to low-income individuals is known as micro-credit. The term refers to the practice of lending modest sums of money to individuals or groups without requiring collateral in order to fund their self-employment or revenue production endeavours. Women are now significantly less dependent on men for financial matters because to a new microfinancing plan and self-help groups (SHGs). The economic independence of women and their empowerment have been aided by this. Evidence from a number of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) shows that low-income rural residents are adept at handling money and credit. In place of financial subsidies, their ability to engage in economic activity depends on the availability of sufficient credit in a timely manner.

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